The Old English Period
450-1150

INTRODUCTION TO ENGLISH LITERATURE

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• Literature is as old as human language.
• It starts with words, and with speech→ the 1st literature in any culture is oral
• In English, the 1st signs of oral literature tend to have 3 kinds of subjects matter:
  1. religion
  2. war
  3. the trials of daily life
• The fragments that remain confirm that the motivations & inspirations for producing literature, & for listening to it (or later, reading it) are the same all through history.

Literature can give:
- comfort
- consolation (as religious lit. often does)
- can illuminate our problems
- can affirm & reinforce social, political & ideological standpoints.
• Caedmon’s Hymn ➔ the 1<sup>st</sup> fragment of lit. (around 670) and it also considered as the 1<sup>st</sup> Christian religious poem written in English. It was preserved by the monks of Whitby.

• Christian monks & nuns, in effect, the guardians of culture ➔ as they were virtually the only people who could read & write before the 14<sup>th</sup> C.
• All the texts in the oral tradition in Anglo-Saxon literature are poetry → most are short (Beowulf is the only long epic poem) & full of images.

• The characteristic of Old English poetry:
  - verse form → a double line with a break in the middle
  - the use of repeated sounds, poetic tropes → enable a writer to describe things indirectly & which require a reader imaginatively to construct their meaning.
• An Epic written in the 11th C. Wessex dialect the beginning of a heroic tradition (emphasizing strength & the territorial imperative).

• The characters & setting: Germanic

• Beowulf is a classic- mortal hero, who comes from afar. He has defeated the mortal enemy of the area ~ the monster Grendel ~ & has thus made the territory safe for its people.
Find the similarities & differences between the two written text
Sources
